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Forests, Education and the World: A Student's Perspective

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Paper prepared for presentation at the "Forests, Wood and Livelihoods: Finding a Future for All" conference conducted by the Crawford Fund for International Agricultural Research, Parliament House, Canberra, Australia, August 16, 2005

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SESSION: FINDING A FUTURE FOR ALL

Forests, Education and the World: A Student's Perspective

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I wish to thank the Crawford Fund for giving me the opportunity to contribute to this conference on behalf of the International Forestry Students' Association (IFSA). I have been asked to respond to presentations by other contributors from the perspective of one of the next generation of foresters. I do not presume to have answers to the issues described today, but simply reactions — and more questions.

My initial reaction is that there are so many large and critical issues relating to forestry today that I fear it may never be possible to arrive at satisfactory outcomes. Then another part of me says 'It will be okay, people will change because they have to, there is no other choice.' Unfortunately we usually need a crisis or catastrophic event to catalyse precautionary steps or change.

Being a young woman who is educated and free is something I often take for granted. I think forests, wood and livelihoods are things that many people also take for granted, particularly in Australia

MS EMMA LESLIE is in the final year of a Bachelor of Forestry/Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Melbourne. She became involved in the International Forestry Student's Association (IFSA) in 2002 at an eye-opening symposium in Indonesia. Since then she has attended symposia in Turkey and Canada, and this year is coordinating the 33rd International Forestry Students' Symposium (IFSS) in Australia. As an active member of IFSA she has had many opportunities to meet forestry students from all over the world, and she enjoys the common goals of such a diverse group. Emma would like to gain work experience in developing countries and eventually work in agroforestry extension and management in low-rainfall areas of Australia.

where fresh drinking water comes out of a tap in the kitchen and fuel to cook dinner or heat the house comes at the touch of a button or the turn of a knob. In many parts of the world this is obviously not the case. Talking to students from all over the world in the course of activities of IFSA has opened my eyes to many issues in forestry and development. Some of these issues have been raised at this meeting. Illegal logging, corruption and the issues and effects of these problems have been discussed in some depth. I am still unclear, however, on how corruption may really be stopped. If it simply a matter of better governance or policing, what is to stop it reappearing?

Why does corruption exists in the first place? Although some part of it is simply human nature, a lot has to do with poverty. Efforts to alleviate poverty have already been described — Australia has contributed to positive outcomes in numerous developing countries. Success stories incorporating forestry include examples of small-scale agroforestry, farm forestry networks, community forest management and participatory forestry.

In Australia many of the forest issues we are taught about or experience are predominantly social: for example, the old-growth forest debate of Tasmania. Issues are commonly inseparable from their political and emotional environment, making it very difficult to come to satisfactory conclusions on technical or scientific grounds alone. In dealing with such issues and seeking workable solutions we must develop processes that satisfy a large number of stakeholders. Forest management in Australia today is largely the management of conflict between a variety of competing uses for, and

values of, forest resources. This situation is one we share with many countries around the world.

An important topic that has not been talked about in great depth, but which is an essential element of many issues, problems and solutions, is education. There is a well-known saying, ‘feed a hungry man a fish and he will eat for a day, teach a hungry man how to fish and he can eat for a lifetime’. We should add the word ‘sustainably’ so that he can manage that resource in a way that does allow him and his family to continue eating—not just for a life-time, but indefinitely for following generations.

I truly believe that education is the key to better forest management throughout the world. The hard part is actually getting in there and being *able* to educate people in a practical and efficient way. It is easy to talk about what we think should be done, but it is always much more difficult to actually implement these programs and solutions. I assume that developed countries take on this responsibility and challenge as part of their aid work with developing countries. This task becomes even more difficult, however, when developed countries are themselves struggling to attract people into environmental management, particularly forestry.

In most of the world the numbers of forestry students at universities has decreased significantly, and consequently graduates are fewer, educational resources and institutions are diminished and the quality of their education is slowly degraded. This will have dire consequences in the future for an industry that contributes much to the wellbeing of the whole planet and all those who inhabit it, and particularly those who depend on forests for their livelihoods. With a growing world population and rapid economic growth in many developing countries such as China and India, it is more important

than ever to have well-educated forest managers to help deal with the ever-increasing pressure on forest resources. Developed countries are still far better off than most others and have the capability to help where it is most needed. As Peter Parker’s uncle explains to the young hero in the recent movie ‘Spiderman’, ‘With great power, comes great responsibility’. The greatest result of education is that it empowers a person to contribute. No one likes to have someone come in and tell them how they should be doing things, but would prefer to be given the knowledge that allows them to make an informed decision instead of a desperate one.

As students, we hope to bring with us to the working world fresh optimism, enthusiasm and sometimes a feeling of invincibility that allows us to think it is *always* possible to make a difference, and that drives us towards continual improvement in forest management as a way of addressing some of the inequalities of the world. What frustrates us, like everyone, is when we do not have a voice that can be heard or the resources to act where we can see a need. Perhaps the most frustrating thing of all, though, is not really knowing what to do when a problem seems too big. This is something that can be addressed by education, which includes more experience and research, and thankfully this is being undertaken in some areas.

As the livelihood of so many depends on forests, the role of foresters and natural resource managers is extremely important in maintaining a balance between the myriad of uses and demands placed on forests. Forests are about people. Education provides the means for people to continually improve the current situation of the world. Through forestry we have the opportunity to find a future for all.